



2019

Thought  
Leadership



# The Receptiveness of Servant Leaders to Feedback...

And the paradox of the  
leadership we need

*This study summarizes the data collected from 24 C-Suite leaders in various financial sector organizations in 8 countries in Africa.*

The 24 participants were sponsored by Financial Sector Deepening Africa (FSD-A) on a year-long programme run by Career Connections. This programme, comprised completing a series of globally benchmarked Hogan personality assessments and the Leadership Versatility Index (LVI) 360 Feedback. These assessments were followed by detailed feedback on results, then 6-8 sessions with an accredited Executive Coach.

Thereafter, the leaders were re-assessed using the Progress Report to determine to what extent there was change on the behaviours they had committed to working on during their coaching. Overall, the group showed a significant degree of improvement as rated by their managers, peers, and employees in their post coaching 360 Feedback. Everyone responded well to the feedback and development coaching. The Progress Reports used at the end of the programme rated participants on -4 to +4 scale that ranged from a 'got worse' in each behaviour to a 'got better' scale. If you were rated 0 it meant you had showed no change on that behaviour, according to your raters.

The overall results of the Progress Report indicate that the clients were rated, on average, as improving a significant degree in terms of overall effectiveness and across all four categories of leadership versatility (being Forceful, Enabling, Strategic and Operational). Internationally, anything above +1.5 degree of change is considered high. On average, this group of leaders across Africa showed +2.3 degree of change. When compared to executives in USA and Europe, who used the same assessment tools, the Progress Report results show the programme participants more than doubled their counter-parts ratings on positive behaviour change.

The leaders with more socialized, humble and servant-oriented personalities showed the greatest degree of improvement. The 'disrupters' - those with opposite behaviours to Servant Leadership - still showed improvement - just not as much as the more other-oriented, socialized leaders. In other words, 'servant leaders' changed were more receptive to coaching.

## What is Servant Leadership?

Robert K Greenleaf ('Servant Leadership - A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power & Greatness - Paulist Press - 1977) coined the term 'Servant Leadership' in the 1970s, writing that 'It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve'.

By 2000, Larry Spears, the President and CEO of the Greenleaf Centre for Servant Leadership (Atlanta, USA), was writing in his 'Servant Leader Essay Series' that 'servant leadership is a quiet revolution in the way we view and practice leadership' and that key attributes of that leadership style was to involve others in decision making; being ethical and caring.

The attributes that make up servant leadership are now part of the expected cultures of the 'Best 100 companies to Work For' globally. Spears, writing in the 'Concepts and Connections - 10 Characters of Servant Leadership' listed what were viewed as key characteristics of the servant leaders.

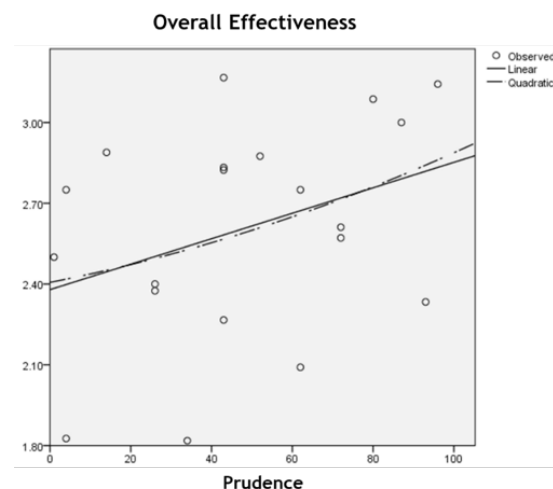
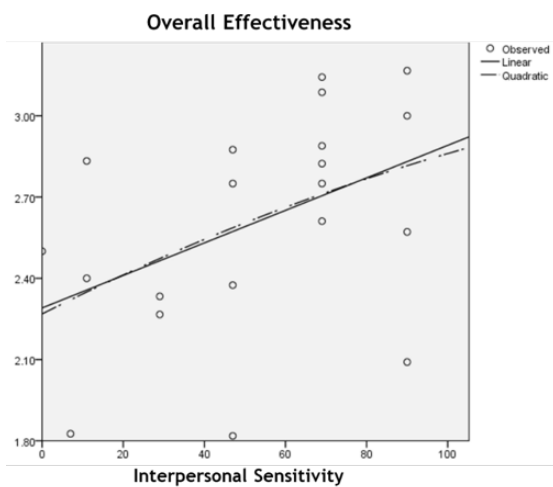
## Matching Servant Leadership to Degree of Behaviour Change

What is key to our study, however, is that from the list of 10 attributes of Servant Leadership, 8 perfectly matched the personality, values and 360 Feedback results of the leaders who showed the most positive degree of changes on the FSD-A sponsored programme:

Larry Spears - Servant Leader Characteristics	Personality, Motives, Values Results Most Closely Related to Change of Behavior
<i>Listening &amp; Reflection; Empathy; Healing; Persuasion - Convincing not Coercing; Growth of People</i>	<i>Interpersonal Sensitivity and Altruism</i>
<i>Awareness</i>	<i>Adjustment</i>
<i>Stewardship - Holding the Organization in Trust for Others</i>	<i>Prudence, Security, Commerce, Dutifulness,</i>
<i>Building the Wider Community</i>	<i>Altruism</i>

The biggest degree of positive behaviour change was exhibited by those leaders who had originally been rated as highly 'Enabling' by their co-workers in their Leadership Versatility Index 360 Feedback reports. Enabling leadership; the opposite of Forceful leadership; comprises of empowering, listening to and supporting others. Enabling leaders give people room to contribute; trusts others; are participative, consider other's input; are open to influence; treat others well; show appreciation and give others the benefit of the doubt.

In addition, those who most likely acted on their feedback showed highly socialized scores in their Hogan Personality Inventory scores: good degrees of Adjustment (agreeableness and stress tolerance); Interpersonal Sensitivity and Prudence (relationship building, empathy, rule following and dependability; reliability). The more socialized the personality, the more behaviour change occurred. We saw some linear correlations to Interpersonal Sensitivity and Prudence to degree of change:



Not all scores followed such a linear pathway - for Adjustment (stress tolerance) we found that the ideal percentage lay between 35-50%, since if a leader had too much stress tolerance they were unlikely to take on board or act on feedback; too low a stress tolerance level and the leader came undone and unable to prioritize where to start on the changes needed.

When examining the scores from the Hogan Development Survey (HDS), which assesses potential derailing behaviours leaders show when under pressure, we saw that those who demonstrated the highest degree of behavioural change after coaching were likely to be low Mischievous when under pressure (non-risk taking and more rule abiding). They were also likely to show higher scores on being Dutiful (consultative and seeking guidance from authority figures when under pressure). Again, this shows that the good 'corporate citizens' - the servant leaders - were showing higher abilities to change.

In terms of the Motives and Values, behaviour change was most closely linked to drivers and values around Security and Commerce. Security in this regards relates to wanting a sense of order and predictability while Commerce refers to the desire for financial reward. These two drivers were observed in the leaders with the highest degree of change which may seem ironic given that a value of security runs contrary to being open to change. Nonetheless, it is possible to view this value of security as the leaders' aspiration to protect their careers (ensure stability and ability to earn financially) which motivated them to 'fall into line' and act upon the feedback.

## Will Servant Leaders Deal with the Financial Sector Change?

So we have established that those leaders who most readily acted upon their development feedback and worked on key behaviours were those who most closely matched a servant leader profile - being dependable, highly focused on other people, altruistic, non- risk taking, and dutiful.

The financial sector in East Africa, where most of these leaders work, has gone through a rapid revolution in the past few years, precipitated by the prevalence of mobile money and banking, which now turns over half of Kenya's GDP, and government imposed interest rate capping in some markets.

What we need to see, therefore, are perhaps less leaders who follow the rules but rather re-invent themselves and their organizations. Leaders who are less good corporate citizens, more disruptors and risk takers.

Yet, the scores which showed least correlation with behaviour change in the programme were around Ambition (drives for results, takes charge) and Inquisitiveness (innovation and strategic perspective), along with Sociability (being outgoing). In other words, those leaders who are self-actualizing, self-interested and self-serving were less likely to change after feedback and coaching. And yet - aren't some of those who have the attributes the ones that will cope with today's increasing competition and innovation?

This ability to think longer term (Conceptualization) and to use lessons from the past for the future (Foresight) are the two remaining servant leader behaviours that did not show up in the leaders who changed the most during the programme.

In 2015 Adam Focht and Michael Pouton, whilst studying the authorities in this area, added Learning to the Servant Leaders list of behaviours, as per their paper in 'International Journal of Leadership Studies' (Regent University, USA).

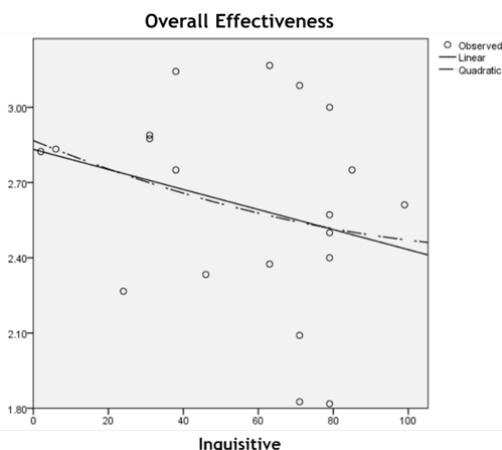
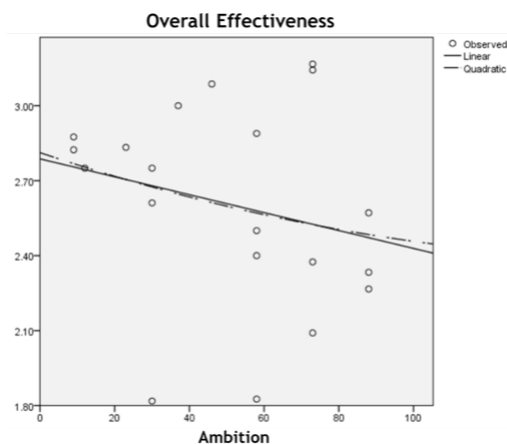
Interestingly, this was an area again not strongly related to change in behaviour- those who scored high in Learning Approach were less likely to change.

## The Profile Needed for Digital Agility

Hogan's recent research with the IMD's Global Centre for Digital Business Transformation, where over 2,000 executives and organizations were surveyed on readiness to deal with digitization, narrowed the attributes leaders will need to survive the exponentially volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous business environment.

Half of the key attributes fit perfectly into the 'servant leadership' mold: being Humble enough to accept feedback and know you do not know everything; being engaged and willing to listen widely.

However, other attributes run contrary to the profiles we saw most likely to change through coaching: being Visionary (whereas those who changed most were lower on Strategic Perspective) and being able to execute at Speed (yet those who we saw change behaviour tend to be more conscientious and have a desire for security).



## Conclusion

Our research showed that everyone responded well to the feedback and development coaching. However, the more socialized, humble leaders improved the most.

There may be more effective approaches to developing the fairly self-absorbed “visionary disrupters,” than through coaching, for instance, through challenge, adversity, and failure experiences.

The future we face will need more mavericks - such as Steve Jobs and Jeff Bezos - to leapfrog us forward. But we prefer working for servant leaders. This is a paradox. Therefore, what we need and desire most will be truly versatile leaders who know when to serve, and when they need to step up and disrupt.

## Author

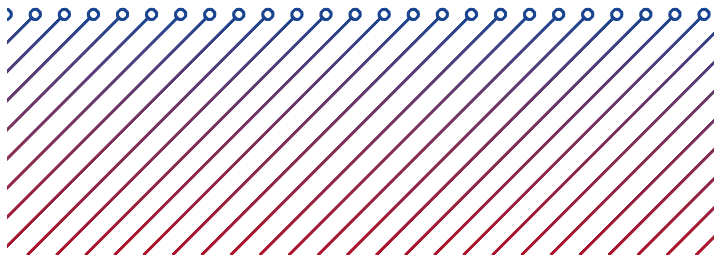


**Madeleine Dunford**

MANAGING DIRECTOR  
CAREER CONNECTIONS

Madeleine earned her first degree at the University of York, UK and her MSc, with Distinction, from the University of Edinburgh, UK. She has attained multiple specialist qualifications from the US and UK in assessing and coaching leaders for development. She is an international faculty member and trainer for the Academy of executive Coaching (AoEC) and Hogan Assessment Systems.

Madeleine is also accredited in other assessment methodologies including the Leadership Versatility Index, Assessments and Development Centres, KF4D and the Morrisby Profile. In 2017 Madeleine completed a Certificate programme at Harvard University, USA, on the Art & Practice of Leadership Development.



## About Career Connections

Career Connections are the leaders in talent consulting. Founded in 1997, we are the partner of choice among organizations seeking to leverage the competitive advantage of their people, impacting organizational effectiveness and return on talent.

We offer a unique portfolio of solutions, integrating unmatched expertise in our core services of executive search, talent assessment, team and leadership development and executive coaching. Through partnerships with global leaders in talent solutions we offer best-in-class and quality focused services.

Our purpose is to help clients through a partnership that offers what is right, to the highest standards, uncompromising in our service and nurturing long-term relationships. We believe this is the only way we can earn the place of being your trusted strategic talent advisor.

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### Telephone

Phone: +254 20 375 2400

### Website & Mail

[www.careerconnectionsLtd.com](http://www.careerconnectionsLtd.com)  
[info@careerconnectionsLtd.com](mailto:info@careerconnectionsLtd.com)

